



Conservative Internationalism: An Overview

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By Charlie Laderman

Charlie Laderman is a Lecturer in International History in the Department of War Studies at King's College London.

Abstract::This introductory essay seeks to historicize the term “conservative internationalism.” It examines how interpretations evolved over the past century and identifies key figures who espoused distinctively conservative visions of America’s role in the world. The majority share a number of common traits: a fervent commitment to guarding national sovereignty against excessive supranational infringement, dedication to maintaining a strong military, trust in the efficacy of American power, a realist appreciation of the need to go to war and concern for order and stability at home and abroad. Yet there are also important differences over the purpose of American power.

The University of Texas Clements Center colloquium that produced the papers for this special issue of *Orbis* sought to explore whether a set of “conservative internationalist” principles, distinct from those associated with “liberal internationalism,” emerged in U.S. foreign policy over the past century.

Liberal internationalism is a foreign policy doctrine that is well known to scholars and policymakers alike. Even non-specialists in international relations have a general sense of the cluster of ideas that comprise liberal internationalism: a belief that international relations can be made more harmonious by the spread of liberal, democratic values and open markets; the conviction that conflict is not endemic to the state system and that the “balance of power” is not necessarily a fundamental feature of international relations; and a general faith that international disputes can be resolved through diplomacy and multilateral institutions.

In recent years, a number of political scientists, notably Henry Nau and Paul Miller, have contended that a separate tradition of conservative internationalism has also yielded a profound influence on the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.¹ These

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scholars have produced some stimulating scholarship on the subject and have sought to outline the theory's core principles and the key figures who helped to develop it. Nevertheless, the concept of "conservative internationalism" remains underexplored, its historical foundations disputed, and its tenets contested.

These articles are concerned with exploring the disparate strands that comprise the conservative internationalist tradition and with analyzing its past, present, and future. The majority of the contributors in this issue of *Orbis* take Nau's definition of "conservative internationalism" as the basis for their essays. Since Nau offers a concise and cogent summary of his thesis at the outset, it is only necessary here to outline its four principal tenets.

First, it views strong nation states, rather than multilateral institutions, as the key actors in international affairs. Second, the theory's internationalism derives from its concern for the nature of political regimes and commitment to the spread of freedom rather than a realist emphasis on territorial security and the balance of power. Third, it argues that diplomacy is most effective when backed by military strength, rather than seeing force as something that should only be used when all negotiations have failed and with the proviso that it requires multilateral sanction. Fourth, while it is concerned with "fighting for freedom," it does so in a conservative manner, prioritizing regions that border existing areas of democracy and placing great emphasis on the need for domestic support at home.

One of the principal aims of these articles is to foster interdisciplinary dialogue between historians and international relations scholars, who have largely discussed ideas about conservative internationalism in isolation from each other and have used the term to refer to very different aspects of American statecraft.

With that goal in mind, this introductory essay seeks to contextualize Nau's thesis by considering it in relation to the nuanced ways in which the term conservative internationalism has been applied and interpreted in American foreign policy debates since World War I. It is by no means a comprehensive assessment, but it is designed to initiate debate on the various ways in which conservatism and internationalism have interacted in the conduct of American foreign policy. It seeks to put these two concepts in dialogue and offer a genealogy of how ideas about conservative internationalism have evolved over the past century.

I first became acquainted with the term "conservative internationalism" in the context used by the historian Thomas Knock in his seminal book, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*. Knock deployed the concept in relation to the competing internationalist visions that underpinned the debate over America's intervention in the First World War. For Knock, "conservative internationalists" were distinct from the liberal and more left-leaning activists who would later help influence the formation of Woodrow Wilson's more

day of debate. I would also like to thank John Bew and Andrew Preston for their feedback on earlier versions of this overview.

¹ Henry Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman and Reagan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Paul Miller, *Armed Power and Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016).

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